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ABSTRACT

It is becoming increasingly apparent that rural communities will have to alter their economic patterns as the United States economy shifts and rural areas cannot compete successfully with cities for emerging industries and future jobs. Instead of catering to the large firms and high-tech companies that are expected to predominate in the future, rural educators might be wiser to focus on training small-scale entrepreneurs--exemplified by family farmers. To do this, rural educators can draw on the proven strengths of vocational agriculture programs coupled with a new program--school-based enterprise. First suggested by Jonathan Sher in the mid 1970's, the school-based enterprise is designed to create jobs, to strengthen the ties between rural youth and their communities, to give rural youth real-life responsibilities, and to offer both entrepreneurial training and employment experience. Georgia and Arkansas have led the way in demonstrating that school-based enterprises can work in economically depressed rural areas. Successful projects in these states have ranged from publishing a town's first weekly newspaper to operating child care centers and developing a computer-assisted swine management program. For future rural development, vocational agriculture, cooperatives, and small-scale entrepreneurship offer better models for rural education than trade- and industry-oriented vocational training programs. (JHZ)

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analysis of emerging issues:

April 1984

Something Old, Something New: The Wedding of
Rural Education and Rural Development

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In November, the Southern Growth Policies Board produced an Alert which forecast economic development patterns for nonmetropolitan regions of the South. It pointed out new conditions which threaten to impede the ability of these regions to capture their share of emerging industries and future jobs. This Alert suggests possible responses from the public schools. It describes two models for secondary education, one an adaptation of an old program and one a new concept, that are explicitly linked to local development. Both have the potential to strengthen the economies of those rural areas adversely affected by changing industrial employment patterns and to expand job opportunities for their youth.

For what jobs should we prepare rural youths? Until about mid-century, that was an easy question to answer. Farming and agriculture-related occupations provided ample employment opportunities for rural youngsters; thus vocational education in rural communities consisted primarily of courses in vocational agriculture. Federal funds for vocational education that were distributed to rural school districts were earmarked for this purpose. Every rural youth did not become a farmer, of course, but agriculture courses were considered appropriate and sufficient occupational education for most.

By the late 1950s, however, agriculture had become so mechanized that farming could no longer provide enough jobs. Unless rural economies became more diversified, it was obvious that rural youths would be forced to leave their communities in order to find work. In 1930 nearly a quarter of the U.S. workforce farmed; by 1960 only about 8% farmed, and most of them needed additional, off-the-farm work to survive. Because rural areas could now offer a surplus labor force, equipped with a strong work ethic and accustomed to low wages, these areas began to attract industries that were anxious to escape the high wages and unionization of the cities. In the 1960s and 1970s nonmetropolitan industrialization spread rapidly.

But vocational agriculture no longer met the needs of this new labor market. Industries sought compliant employees with specialized skills who were willing to work standard shifts in the factories. Aided by newly available federal funding, rural school systems responded by constructing regional vocational education centers to deliver the training that industries sought. Vocational educators designed new programs intended to alter both the skills and the behaviors of rural youths - many of whom had grown up on farms - to better suit the industrial workplace, which, unlike the farm, was hierarchical, structured, and specialized.

This paper was written by Stuart Rosenfeld, director of research and programs, and published in a special issue of the Phi Delta Kappan devoted to rural education, December 1983.

Such industries as textiles, apparel, and metal fabrication helped to shore up declining rural economies and to supplement the family incomes of farmers. New employment opportunities in factories saved many marginal farms and replaced the agricultural jobs that had already been lost. Transforming vocational education to meet the needs of industry seemed a reasonable and progressive strategy. The advantage of available jobs overshadowed the hidden dangers of this new type of economic growth. Few individuals expressed concern that the owners of these new rural plants (and thus the decision-making authority) resided in distant urban centers, that rural communities were growing too dependent on one or two companies, and that factory work was often poorly paid and performed under poor working conditions. Rural schools continued to churn out the workers needed to support the influx of industries.

More important, few individuals foresaw that industrial growth would be disrupted in the 1980s by international competition, exorbitant interest rates, automation, and a general reduction in world demand for manufactured goods. As a result, the migration of industrial jobs to rural areas slowed to a crawl and sometimes even reversed. Numerous industries either moved to automation or relocated overseas, leaving many rural communities with fewer available jobs, with unskilled and relatively inflexible workforces, and without infrastructures on which to rebuild. However, rural communities still retain certain advantages: their natural resources, their community schools, and their agrarian traditions of hard work, resourcefulness, and productivity. Ironically, one of their biggest advantages is the fact that they lack the physical and social problems of U.S. cities. This reality has triggered a growing desire among skilled workers and professionals in urban centers to live instead in rural communities, where life is better.

What can education do to help rebuild rural economies? Agriculture, fishing, mining, lumbering, and other sources of rural employment may continue to mechanize and thus to reduce their labor market needs. Factories may continue to abandon rural America for Latin America and the Far East. The new high-tech industries may continue to locate in metropolitan areas, which can offer them sophisticated research and development centers and highly educated workers. For what kinds of work, then, should rural schools prepare their students?

The answer may lie where we least expect it. Instead of catering to the large firms and high-tech companies that are expected to dominate the U.S. economy in the future, rural educators might be wiser to focus on small-scale entrepreneurs (exemplified by family farmers), supporting this focus with the same kind of high school education that helped transform U.S. agriculture into one of the most efficient industries in the world. For future rural development, vocational agriculture, cooperatives, and small-scale entrepreneurship may be better models than trade and industrial programs and branch plants.

Research evidence supports educating rural youths for self-employment and for jobs with small businesses. The data reveal that businesses with fewer than 20 employees have accounted for two-thirds of all the new jobs in the U.S. during the last decade; moreover, rates of self-employment and of employment in small businesses are relatively higher in rural areas than elsewhere. In 1981, for example, the self-employment rate was 12% in Tennessee, 15% in Oklahoma, and 16% in Arkansas. In that same year, the proportion of the workforce engaged in businesses with fewer than 20 employees was 38% in Kentucky and Alabama and 31% in Mississippi.¹ These small businesses, with their strong community ties and their vested interests in local development, will eventually fortify rural economies.

I do not mean to suggest a wholesale return to vocational agriculture for rural youths - but rather an increased appreciation of the entrepreneurial values and skills that such programs provided. By infusing the same values and skills into educational programs designed to train rural youths for employment in new and emerging industries, we may be able to repeat the success story of U.S. agriculture.

This will never be accomplished through industry-oriented vocational education centers in rural areas, however. These centers, like the metropolitan schools they imitate, emphasize the production of narrowly trained workers - even though the pressing need is for productive entrepreneurs who can create jobs and revitalize rural economies. A study by the Small Business Administration in 1981 found that entrepreneurship and small business are rarely discussed in the classroom - even though small business is widely perceived to be the backbone of the U.S. economy.² Thus most students leave high school with no awareness of the roles of the entrepreneur and small business in the U.S. socioeconomic structure - or even in their own communities. The broad skills and independent attitudes essential for entrepreneurship are, in fact, antithetical to the process of education in most U.S. schools.

If rural communities are to survive current changes in the economy, they will have to rethink educational policies and practices once again. Fortunately, a foundation on which to build successfully already exists - traditional rural education. An old program, updated to meet modern occupational needs, coupled with a new program that builds on rural values, may be the best prescription to support rural economic growth.

The old program is vocational agriculture, perhaps the most successful and most underrated educational venture in U.S. history. The new program is a school-based enterprise, built on the experiential aspects of vocational education but moving it a step closer to genuine development of the rural economy.

VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE

To most Americans, vocational agriculture is a part of the nation's past. During the first half of this century, vocational agriculture "ruled the roost" in vocational education circles. In 1963, however, the Vocational Education Act required programs to be matched to labor market demand, and the hegemony of vocational agriculture came to an end. Since less than 3% of all U.S. workers are farmers today, Americans tend to see vocational agriculture as out of step with the times - a throwback to the first half of the century, when farming still offered reasonable employment opportunities.

Most state and federal policies suggest that area vocational centers, with their specialized training, represent progress. But this progress has meant more than simply imparting new and different skills to students. For rural schools, it has also meant different methods and a different philosophy of education. And it is growing increasingly evident that the old vocational agriculture programs better fit the modern needs of rural America and provide a more effective stimulus to economic growth than do these newer, more specialized vocational education programs. Indeed, vocational agriculture is responsive to many of the recommendations that the various commissions and task forces on educational reform have recently put forth. Let us look at some of the advantages of vocational agriculture programs.

Perhaps the most outstanding contribution of vocational agriculture is the leadership training it provides through an allied student organization, the Future Farmers of America (FFA). Ostensibly an extracurricular activity, the FFA is really an integral part of the vocational agriculture program, reinforcing the program's focus on

management training and problem-solving activities. The FFA sets clear standards and goals; its members progress through four ranks, from Greenhand to American Farmer, based on their achievements in community service, in small-business operations, and in basic and occupational skills. Awards based on group achievements, which are given to schools, encourage cooperation among students. The success of the FFA in developing leaders is remarkable; for example, among recent leaders from the "New South," Gov. James Hunt of North Carolina, Gov. Robert Graham of Florida, and former President Jimmy Carter were all once FFA officers.

A second contribution of vocational agriculture is its use of a problem-solving approach to teach mathematics and science. Students are taught to use the scientific method, not simply to follow procedures. Thus it isn't too surprising that a vocational agriculture student and FFA officer from Perry County, New York, could cross-breed cattle through artificial insemination, carefully record and analyze her test data, and eventually produce a breed that reaches its final weight in 14, not 18, months. Among vocational agriculture students, such projects are not atypical.

Third, the agriculture curriculum is less specialized than other vocational education curricula, because the explicit goals of vocational agriculture have always gone beyond the purely technical skills to encompass equally vital political, economic, and communication skills. Despite federal and state attempts to compartmentalize the program more narrowly into specialties, most vocational agriculture students continue to study business and management skills as well as production techniques. Such program titles as agricultural mechanics, agricultural supplies, or agribusiness often represent mere reporting distinctions that are used to meet government requirements, not genuine curricular differences. In most rural schools, every student enrolled in vocational agriculture is given the necessary knowledge and skills to begin and to manage a small business. In fact, each student is required to set up a small-business project or experiment of which he or she must estimate productivity and keep financial records. This "supervised occupational experience" is an integral part of the vocational agriculture program.

Fourth, vocational agriculture programs are tied directly to the community and thus have strong community support. Students and faculty members work with local groups on fairs, community education programs, and other community activities. One vocational agriculture teacher in a small West Virginia town bragged that he needs little support from the vocational education department; if he needs anything at all, the community will either donate it, raise the funds for it, or other-wise make certain that he gets it.

Fifth, the vocational agriculture program is able to maintain an adequate supply of dedicated and competent teachers by encouraging outstanding students to go on to college and then to join the teaching force. Most vocational agriculture teachers have come through the program themselves, and they strongly believe in its philosophy and its value. The regular visits these teachers make to students' homes during the school year, to meet with students' parents and to monitor home-study projects, demonstrate their dedication to the program. The teachers' enthusiasm is bound to be contagious.

Sixth, students of vocational agriculture spend more time in their programs than do other vocational students. Add to the school day and year the after-school and weekend meetings of the FFA and the supervised occupational experience, which is generally a 12-month project. To the extent that FFA activities and the occupational

experience are academically central - not peripheral - to the program, they significantly expand actual time on task.

Seventh, vocational agriculture programs are almost always located in comprehensive high schools, which makes nonvocational courses and other school activities more accessible to students. Vocational agriculture students are less isolated from their counterparts in academic programs than are those vocational students whose classes meet in an area vocational center.

Despite these strength of vocational agriculture, it is difficult to justify large expenditures for programs that are ostensibly designed to prepare youths for a declining labor market. However, the key - but often overlooked - justification for vocational agriculture is its entrepreneurial qualities. Rural schools might be better off if they modified their vocational agriculture programs by improving their weaknesses (adding foreign languages, for example, or more theory in mathematics and science) and by broadening their focus to include training for a host of rural entrepreneurial activities. One of the characteristics of rural America is that it affords numerous economic opportunities. Entrepreneurial education can help rural youths identify and take advantage of these economic opportunities, instead of passively waiting for outsiders to do so - and then standing in line for the limited jobs that might be generated.

SCHOOL-BASED ENTERPRISES

One of the features of vocational agriculture that dates back to the turn of the century is the school-based business. Today's vocational education students sell everything from greenhouse-grown plants to homes that the students have built or renovated. Although these are useful ways to teach business practices, the projects have been created to fit into ongoing school programs. They are not businesses in the true sense, because they have not been planned to meet specific local needs or to yield long-term profits.

However, a second model, the school-based enterprise, explicitly combines educational objectives with local economic and community development goals. First suggested by Jonathan Sher in the mid-1970s as one possible solution to rural underdevelopment and to what Sher saw as inappropriate rural education, the school-based enterprise is designed to create jobs, to strengthen the ties between rural youths and their communities, to give rural youngsters real-life responsibilities, and to offer both entrepreneurial training and employment experience. The school-based enterprise puts the rural school squarely in the middle of economic development activities at the local level, as it was in earlier times. The school-based enterprise, according to Sher, should initially complement and eventually supplant vocational training in the schools - and should function throughout as a community development corporation that works for the economic and social welfare of the entire community.³

The experiments with school-based enterprises that have occurred have not stemmed from state or federal policies; rather, they have been the work of dedicated individuals who have sought to rejuvenate depressed rural communities. Georgia and Arkansas have been the sites of the most ambitious projects.

In Arkansas, the impetus for the school-based enterprises came from the Arkansas Community Education Development Association (ACEDA). Picking up on Sher's ideas, Robert Bell, the executive director of ACEDA, invited towns with high unemployment rates and a high proportion of low-income families to submit proposals for business

ventures that would begin in 1981.⁴ The proposals that arrived made it clear that educators and community leaders were not accustomed to working together and that neither group knew very much about economic development. Both had to be taught to conduct feasibility studies and economic forecasts, in order to select a venture that was likely to succeed and, equally important, that would not compete with existing businesses.

With small grants from a number of foundations, five towns actually created school-based enterprises. In Mammoth Springs, where two-thirds of the population is economically disadvantaged, students began to publish the town's first weekly newspaper. In Arkansas City, where the incomes of half the population fall below the poverty level, students began a maintenance shop called Handyman, Inc., and a small newspaper. The next year they renovated a historic building and converted it into apartments. In Mountain Pine, students started a day-care center and built a roller-skating rink. In Pangborn, the initial project was a newspaper, and a feasibility study for a wood-working plant has recently been completed. In Clarendon, students opened a movie theater.

Meanwhile, Paul Delargy was the catalyst for the school-based enterprises in Georgia. The first enterprises were created in Brooks County, a poor, rural, predominantly black school district with a high dropout rate, located in the southern part of the state. The project began with a student-conducted needs assessment of the community. The students discovered that the absence of a child-care facility prevented many women from working and limited the social and intellectual development of many disadvantaged children. With the support of the community, the students built and now operate a child-care center on the high school grounds that has been enormously successful. In fact, the state has made this school-based enterprise the only secondary school in Georgia that graduates students who are certified as child-care workers.

In response to the needs of a small - and often economically marginal - group of swine farmers, Brooks County High School students also developed a relatively sophisticated feeder pig operation on school property adjacent to the football field. Besides producing a good profit for reinvestment in other school ventures, this feeder pig operation has helped the county's 200 swine farmers improve their own productivity. For example, the students have recently developed a computer-based swine management program that will make the operations of local farmers more efficient and profitable.

Just as important, participation in school-based enterprises has increased the motivation of Brooks County students to perform well academically, because they now see the practical applications of the skills that they are learning in the classroom. School-based enterprises have also reduced the dropout rate and helped to instill a renewed sense of self-confidence and a stronger commitment to education among students and citizens alike.

Georgia has provided another noteworthy example of connecting education and local development, this one predating Sher's model. Foxfire is widely known for its publications celebrating the Appalachian culture and traditional rural skills. Less recognized is the fact that Foxfire has used the royalties to create other student- or alumni-operated ventures that range from record, book, and television companies to the construction of solar homes. With each passing year, Foxfire has further translated its educational mission into active involvement in economic and community development.

Arkansas and Georgia have demonstrated that school-based enterprises can succeed. Thus far, the major limitation to this approach has been an inability to bring in new

money by marketing products and services outside the local community. Foxfire has shown that student-operated businesses can export products; but it will take time, experience, and venture capital to expand other school-based enterprises beyond their local communities.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that rural communities will have to alter their economic patterns as the U.S. economy shifts. Current evidence suggests that rural communities cannot compete successfully with cities for the industries that are now emerging. Service and high-tech companies are concentrating primarily in the metropolitan areas.⁵ Nevertheless, Jeffrey Schiff maintains that "most small communities have their share of creative people who are willing to take a risk on a good idea. Small towns, with their heavy emphasis on agriculture, might actually have a higher incidence of such risk-takers than larger places."⁶ It's up to rural communities to build on that advantage, and rural schools must provide support.

Specialized industrial training will not encourage rural entrepreneurship. Such models as vocational agriculture and school-based enterprises - which mix experiential education, community service, and entrepreneurial training (a la John Dewey) - will encourage local development. By bringing together something old and something new, educators have the opportunity to wed rural education and rural development in ways that benefit individual students, local communities, and the U.S. as a whole.

1. U.S. Small Business Administration, The State of Small Business: A Report of the President to the Congress (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 209.

2. White House Commission on Small Business, America's Small Business Economy, Agenda for Action: A Report to the President (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1980).

3. Jonathan P. Sher, Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of the Conventional Wisdom (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1977), pp. 291-346.

4. Year One: An Evaluation of School-Based Development Corporations in Five Rural Arkansas Towns (Little Rock: Arkansas Community Education Development Association, June 1982).

5. Bobbie H. McCrackin, "Services: Key to Current Stability and Future Growth," Economic Review, July 1983, pp. 36-52.

6. Jeffrey H. Schiff, "Home Grown Investment: Look What They've Done to Economic Development," Reporter: National Association of Towns and Townships, July 1983, p. 5.

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